

A GRACELESS HUSBAND*

BY HAMLIN GARLAND

Beyond his necessity, a tired man is not apt to be polite. This Mrs. Miner had generalized from long experience with her husband. She knew at a distance, by the way he wore his hat when he came in out of the field, whether he was in a peculiarly savage mood, or only in his usual state of sullen indifference.

As he came in out of the barn on this spring day, he turned to look up at the roof with a curse. Something had angered him. He did not stop to comb his hair after washing at the pump, but came into the neat kitchen, and surlily took a seat at the table.

Mrs. Miner, a slender little woman, quite ladylike in appearance, had the dinner all placed in steaming abundance upon the table, and the children, sitting side by side, watched their father in silence. There was an air of foreboding, of apprehension, over them all, as if they feared some brutal outbreak on his part.

He placed his elbows on the table. His sleeves were rolled up, displaying his red and much sunburned arms. He wore no coat, and his face was sullen, and held, besides, a certain vicious quality, like that of a bad-tempered dog.

He had not spoken to his wife directly for many weeks. For years it had been his almost constant habit to address her through the children, by calling her "she" or "your mother." He had done this so long that even the little ones were startled when he said, looking straight at her:

"Say, what are you goin' t' do about that roof?"

Mrs. Miner turned her large gray eyes upon him in sudden confusion. "Excuse me, Tom, I didn't—"

"I said, 'What you goin' t' do about that roof?' " he repeated brutally.

*Published in *The Northwestern Miller* 1893.

"What roof?" she asked timidly.

"What roof?" he repeated after her. "Why, the barn, of course? It's leakin' and rottin' my oats. It's none o' my business," he went on, his voice containing an undercurrent of vicious insult, "only I thought you'd like to know it's worse than ever. You can do as you like about it," he said again, and there was a peculiar tone in his voice, as if, by using that tone, he touched her upon naked nerves somewhere. "I guess I can cover the oats up."

A stranger would not have known what it all meant, and yet there was something in what he said that made his wife turn white. But she answered quietly:

"I'll send word to the carpenter this afternoon. I'm sorry," she went on, the tears coming to her eyes. She turned away and looked out of the window, while he ate on indifferently. At last she turned with a sudden impulse: "O Tom, why can't we be friends again? For the children's sake, you ought to—"

"Oh, shut up!" he snarled. "Good God! Can't you let a thing rest? Suits me well enough. I ain't complainin'. So, just shut up."

He rose with a slam, and went out. The two children sat with hushed breath. They knew him too well to cry out.

Mrs. Miner sat for a long time at the table, without moving. At last she rose, and went sighfully at work: "Morty, I want you to run down to Mr. Wilber's, and ask him to come up and see me about some work." She stood at the window and watched the boy, as he stepped lightly down the road. "How much he looks like his father, in spite of his sunny temper," she thought, and it was not altogether a pleasant thing to think of, though she did not allow such a thought to take definite shape.

The young carpenter whom Wilber sent to fill Mrs. Miner's order walked with the gay feet of youth, as he passed out of the little town toward the river. When he came to the bridge he paused and studied the scene with slow, delighted eyes. The river came down over its dam with a leap of buoyant joy, as if leaping to freedom. Above the dam it lay in a quiet pool, mirroring every bud and twig. Below, it curved away between low banks, with bushes growing to the water's edge, where the pickerel lay.

But the young man seemed to be saddened by the view of the mill, which had burned some years before. It seemed like the charred body of a living thing, this heap of blackened and twisted shafts and pulleys, lying half-burned in tangles of weeds.

It appealed so strongly to young Morris that he gave an unconscious sigh, as he walked on across the bridge and clambered the shelving road, which was cut out of the yellow sandstone of the hillside.

The road wound up the sandy hillside, and came, at length, to a beautiful broad terrace of farm-land, that stretched back toward the higher bluffs. The house toward which the young fellow went was painted white, and had green blinds, which transplanted New Englanders carry with them wherever they go.

Soldierly Lombardy poplar trees stood in the yard, and beds of flowers lined the walk. Mrs. Miner was at work in the beds when he came up.

"Good day," he said cordially. "Glorious spring weather, ain't it?" He smiled pleasantly. "Is this Mrs. Miner?"

"Yes, sir." She looked at him wonderingly.

"I'm one of Wilber's men," he explained. "He couldn't get away, so he sent me up to see what needed doing."

"Oh," she said, with a relieved tone. "Very well; will you go look at it?"

They walked, side by side, out toward the barn. It had the look of great age in its unpainted decay. It was gray as granite, and worn fuzzy with sleet and snow. The young fellow looked around at the grass, the dandelions, the vague and beautiful shadows flung down upon the turf by the scant foliage of the willows and apple trees, and took off his hat, as if in the presence of something holy. "What a lovely place," he said, "all but the mill down there; it seems too bad it burned up. I hate to see a ruin, most of all, one of a mill." She looked at him in surprise. She saw he was not at all an ordinary workman. He had a thoughtful face, and the workman's dress he wore could not entirely conceal a certain delicacy of limb. His voice had a touch of cultivation in it.

"The work I want done is on the barn," she said at length. "Do you think it needs reshingling?"

He looked up at it critically, his head still bare. She noticed his head now, a good, strong, clearly defined profile. There was something fine and powerful in the poise of his head.

"You haven't been working for Mr. Wilber long," she said.

He turned toward her with a smile of gratification, as if he knew she had detected something out of the ordinary in him.

"No, I'm just out of school, at the university," he said, with ready confidence. "You see, I'm one of these fellows that have to work my passage. I got hard up, and had to go to work again." He looked up at the roof again, as if checking himself. "Yes, I should think from here that it would have to be resingled."

She sighed resignedly, and he knew she was poor. "Well, I suppose you had better do it."

She thought of him pleasantly, as he walked off down the road after the lumber and tools that were necessary. And, in his turn, he wondered whether she were a widow or not. It promised to be a pleasant job. She was quite handsome, in a serious way, he decided—very womanly and dignified. Perhaps this was his romance, he thought, with the ready imagination upon this point of a youth of his age.

He returned soon with a German teamster, who helped him unload his lumber and erect his stagings. When noon came he was working away on the roof, tearing the old shingles off with a spade.

He was a little uncertain about his dinner. It was the custom to board carpenters when they were working on a farm, but the farm was so near town, possibly Mrs. Miner would not think it necessary. He decided, however, to wait till one o'clock, to be sure. At half past twelve, a man came in out of the field with a team—a short man, with curly hair, curly chin-beard and mustache. He walked with a little swagger, and his legs were slightly bowed. Morris called him "a little feller," and catalogued him by the slant on his hat.

"Say," called Morris suddenly, "won't you come up here and help me raise my staging?"

The man looked up with a muttered curse of surprise. "Who the hell y' take me for? Hired man?" he asked, and then, after a moment, continued, in a tone which was an insult: "You don't want to rip off the whole broadside of that roof. Ain't y' got any sense? Come a rain, it'll raise hell with my hay."

"It ain't going to rain," Morris replied. He wanted to give him a sharp reply, but concluded not to do so. This was evidently the husband. His romance was very short.

"Tom, won't you call the man in?" asked Mrs. Miner, as her husband came up to the kitchen door.

"No, call 'im yourself. You've got a gullet."

Mrs. Miner's face clouded a little, but she composed herself. "Morty, run out and tell the carpenter to come to dinner."

"Boss is in a temper," Morris thought, as he listened to Miner's reply. He came up to the well, where Morty brought him a clean towel, and waited to show him into the kitchen.

Miner was just sitting down to the table when Morris entered. His sleeves were rolled up. He had his old white hat on his head. He lounged upon one elbow on the table. His whole bearing was swinish.

"What do I care?" he growled, as if in reply to some low-voiced warning his wife had uttered. "If he don't like it, he can lump it, and if you don't like my ways," he said, turning upon her, "all you've got to do is to say so, and I git out."

Morris was amazed at all this. He could not believe that he understood what had been said. There was something beneath the man's words which puzzled him and forbade his inquiry. He sat down near the oldest child and opposite Mrs. Miner. Miner began to eat, and Morris was speaking pleasantly to the child nearest him, when he heard an oath and a slap. He looked to see Miner's hat falling from Mrs. Miner's cheek.

She had begun a silent grace, and her husband had thrown his hat in her face. She kept her eyes upon her plate, and her lips moved as if in prayer, though a flush of red streamed up her neck and covered her face.

Morris leaped up, his eyes burning into Miner's face. "H'yere!" he shouted, "What's all this? Did you strike her?"

"Set down!" roared Miner. "You're too fresh."

"I'll let you know how fresh I am," said the young fellow, shaking his brawny fist in Miner's face.

Mrs. Miner rose, with a ghastly smile on her face, which was now as pale as it had been flushed. "Please don't mind him; he's only fooling." Morris looked at her, and understood a little of her feeling as a wife and mother. He sat down. "Well, I'll let him know the weight of my fist, if he does anything more of that business when I'm around," he said, looking at her, and then at her husband. "I didn't grow up in a family where things like that go on. If you'll just say the word, I—I'll—"

"Please don't do anything," she said, and he saw that he had better not, if he wished to shield her from further suffering. The meal proceeded in silence. Miner apparently gloried in what he had done.

The children were trembling so they could scarcely eat. They dared not cry. Their eyes were fixed upon their father's face, like the eyes of kittens accustomed to violence. The wife tried to conceal her shame and indignation. She thought she succeeded very well, but the big tears rolling down from her wide, unseeing eyes were pitiful to witness.

Morris ate his dinner in silence, not seeing anything further to do or say. His food choked him, and he found it necessary to drink great drafts of water.

At last, she contrived to say, "How did you find the roof?" It was a pitiful attempt to cover the dreadful silence.

"It was almost as good as no roof at all," he replied, with the desire to aid her. "Those shingles, I suppose, have been on there for thirty years. I suppose those shingles must have been rived out by just such a machine as Old Man Means used, in 'The Hoosier Schoolmaster.'" From this, he went on to tell about some of the comical parts of the story, and so managed to end the meal in a fairly presentable way.

"She's found another sympathizer," sneered the hus-

band, returning to his habit of addressing his wife in the third person.

After eating his dinner, Miner lit his pipe and swaggered out, as if he had done an admirable thing. Morris remained at the table, talking with the children. After Miner had gone out, he looked up at Mrs. Miner, as if expecting her to say something in explanation of what had occurred. But she had again forgotten him, and sat biting her lips and looking out of the window. Her bosom heaved, like that of one about to weep. Her wide-open eyes had unutterable sorrow in their beautiful depths.

Morris got up and went out, in order to prevent himself from weeping too. He hammered away on the roof like mad for an hour, and wished that every blow fell on that little villain's curly pate.

He did not see Mrs. Miner to speak to her again till the next forenoon, when she came out to see how the work was getting on. He came down from the roof to meet her, and they stood side by side, talking the job over and planning other work. She spoke, at last, in a low, hesitating voice, and without looking at him:

"You mustn't mind what Mr. Miner does. He's very peculiar, and you're likely—that is, I mean—"

She could not finish her lie. The young man looked down on her resolutely. "I'd like to lick him, and I'd do it for a leather cent."

She put out her hand with a gesture of dismay. "Oh, don't make trouble; please don't."

"I won't if you don't want me to, but that man needs a licking the worst of any one I ever saw." "Mrs. Miner," he said, after a little pause, "I wish you'd tell me why he acts that way. Now, there must be some reason for it. No sane man is going to do a thing like that."

She looked away, a hot flush rising upon her face. She felt a distinct longing for sympathy. There was something very engaging in this young man's candid manner.

"I do not know who is to blame," she said at last, as if in answer to a question. "I've tried to be a good wife to him for the children's sake. I've tried to be patient. I suppose if I'd made the property all over to him, as most wives

do, at first, it would have avoided all trouble." She paused to think a moment.

"But, you see," she went on suddenly, "father never liked him at all, and he made me promise never to let the mill or the farm go out of my hands, and then I didn't think it necessary. It belonged to us both, just as much as if I'd signed it over. I considered he was my husband. I knew how father felt, especially about the mill, and I couldn't go against his wish."

She had the impulse to tell it all now, and she sat down on a bunch of shingles, as if to be able to state it better. Her eyes were turned away, her hands sought each other like timid, living things seeking aid, and, looking upon her, the young man felt a lump rise in his throat.

"It began all at once, you see. I mean the worst of it did. Of course, we'd had sharp words, as all people who live together are apt to have, I suppose, but they didn't last long. You see, everything was mine, and he had nothing at all when he came home with me. He'd had bad luck, and he—he never was a good business man."

The tears were on her face again. She was retrospectively approaching that miserable time when her suffering began. The droop of her head appealed to the young man with immense power. He had an impulse to take her in his arms and comfort her, as if she were his sister.

She mastered herself at last, and went on, in a low, monotonous way: "One day, the same summer the mill burned, one of the horses kicked at little Morty, and I said I'd sell it, and he said it was all nonsense; the horse wasn't to blame. And I told him I wouldn't have a horse around that would kick. And when he said I shouldn't sell it, I said a dreadful thing. I knew it would cut him, but I said it. I said, 'The horse is mine; the farm is mine; I can do what I please with my own, for all of you.'"

She fell silent here, and Morris was forced to ask, "What did he do then?"

"He looked at me, a queer, long look that made me shiver, and then he walked off, and he never spoke to me again directly for months. And from that day, he almost never speaks to me, except through the children. He calls

me names through them. He cuts me every time he can. He does everything he can to hurt me. He never dresses up; and he wears his hat in the house at all times, and rolls up his sleeves at the table, just because he knows it makes me suffer. Sometimes I think he is crazy, and yet—"

"Oh, no, he ain't crazy. He's devilish," Morris blurted out. "Great guns! I'd like to lay my hands on him."

She seemed to feel that a complete statement was demanded. "I can't invite anybody to the house, for there's no knowing what he'll do. He may stay in the fields all day, and never come in at all, or he may come in and curse and swear at me or do something—I never can tell what he is goin' to do."

"Haven't you any relatives here?" Morris asked.

"Yes, but I'm ashamed to let them know about it, because they all said I'd repent; and then, he's my husband, and he's the father of my children."

"A mighty poor excuse of one, I call him," said the young man with decision.

"I tried to give him the farm, when I found it was going to make trouble, but he wouldn't take it then. He won't listen to me at all. He keeps throwing it up to me that he's earning his living, and if I don't think he is, he will go any minute. He works in the field, but that's all. He won't advise with me at all. He says it's none of his business. He won't do a thing around the house or garden. I tried to get him to oversee the mill for me, but, after our trouble, he refused to do anything about it. I hired a man to run it, but it didn't pay that way, and then it was idle for a while, and at last it got afire some way and burned up—tramps, I suppose.

"Oh, dear," she sighed, rising, "I don't see how it's going to end; it must end some time. Sometimes it seems as if I couldn't stand it another day, and then I think of my duty as a mother and wife, and I think perhaps God intended this to be my cross."

The young fellow was silent. It was a great problem. The question of divorce had never before been borne in upon him in this personal way. It seemed to him a clear case. The man ought to be driven off, and the woman left in

peace. He thought of the pleasure it would give her to hear the sound of the mill again.

They stood there, side by side, nearly the same age, and yet the woman's face was already lined with suffering, and her eyes were full of shadow. There seemed no future for her, and yet she was young.

"Please don't let him know I've said anything to you, will you?"

"I'll try not to," he said, but he did not consider himself bound to any definite concealment.

They ate dinner together without Miner, who had a fit of work on hand which made him stubbornly unmindful of any call to eat. He thought it would worry his wife.

The meal was a pleasant one, on the whole, and they found many things in common to talk about. Morris wanted to ask her a few more questions about her life, but she begged him not to do so, and started him off on the story of his college life. He was an enthusiastic talker, and told her his plans with boyish frankness. He forgot his fatigue, and she lost, for a time, her premature cares and despairs. They were laughing together over some of his college pranks, when Miner came in at the door.

"Oh, I see," he said, with an insulting, insinuating inflection. "Now I understand the early dinner."

Morris sprang up, and, walking over to the sneering husband, glared down at him with a look of ferocity that sat singularly upon his round, fresh face. "Now, you shut up! If you open your mouth to me again I'll lick you till your hide won't hold pumpkins."

Miner shrank back, turned on his heel, and went off to the barn. He did not return for his dinner.

Morris insisted on helping Mrs. Miner clear up the yard and uncover the grape vine. He liked her very much. She appealed to the protector in him, and she interested him besides, because of the melancholy which was lined on her delicate face, and voiced in her low, soft utterances.

He appealed to her, because of his delicacy, as well as strength. He had something of the modern man's love for flowers, and did not attempt to conceal his delight in thus tinkering about at woman's work. He ate supper with her,

and worked on until it was quite dark, tired as he was, and then shook hands and said "Good night."

Morris came back to his work the next day with a great deal of anticipation of pleasure. He had spent considerable thought upon the matter. He had almost determined on a course of action. He had thought of going directly to Miner and saying:

"Now look here, Miner, if you was half a man, you'd pull out, and leave this woman in peace. How you can stand around here, and occupy the position you do, I don't see."

But when he remembered Mrs. Miner's words about the children, another consideration came in. Suppose he should take the children with him—that was the point; that was the uncertain part of the problem. It did not require any thought to remember that the law took very little consideration of the woman's feelings. He said to himself that, if he ever became judge, he would certainly give decisions that would send such a man as Miner simply whirling out into space.

Miner was in the barn when Morris clambered up the ladder with a bunch of shingles on his shoulder, about seven o'clock. He came out and said:

"Say, you want to fix that window up there."

"Get away from there," shouted Morris, in uncontrollable rage, "or I'll smash this bunch of shingles on your cussed head. Don't you open that ugly p'tater trap at me, you bow-legged little skunk. I'm going to lick you like a sock, before I'm done with you."

He would have done so then, had he been on the ground, but he disdained taking the trouble to climb down. He planned to catch him when he came up to dinner. The more he thought of it, the more his indignation grew. As he grew to hate the man more, he began to entertain the suspicions to which Wilber confessed in confidence.

They had a cheerful meal together again, for Miner did not come in until one o'clock. During the nooning Morris finished spading the flower beds, in spite of Mrs. Miner's entreaties that he should rest. It gave him great pleasure to work there with her and the children.

"You see, I'm lonesome here," he explained. "Just out of school, and I miss the boys and girls. I don't know anybody, except a few of the carpenters here, and so—well, I kind of like it. I always helped around the house at home."

He spaded away, without many words. The warm sun shone down upon them all, and they made a pretty group. Mrs. Miner, rake in hand, was pulverizing the beds as fast as he spaded, her face flushed, and almost happy. The children were wrist-deep in the fresh earth, planting twigs and pebbles, their babble of talk someway akin to the cry of the woodpecker, the laugh of the robin, the twitter of the sparrow, the smell of spring, and the merry downpour of sunshine.

Mrs. Miner was silent. She was thinking how different her life would have been if her husband had only taken an interest in her affairs. She did not think of any one else as her husband, but only Miner in a different mood.

Morris went back to work. As the work neared the end, his determination to punish the scoundrel husband grew. His inclination to charge him with burning the mill grew stronger. He wondered if it wouldn't serve as a club. "Now, sir," he said, meeting Miner as he came out of the barn that night, "I'm done on the barn, but I'm not done on you. I'm goin' to whale you till you won't know yourself. I ought 'o 'a' done it that first day at dinner." He advanced upon Miner, who backed away, scared at something he saw in the young man's eyes and something he heard in his inflexible tone of voice.

He thrust out his palm in a wild gesture. "Keep away from me. I'll split your heart if you touch me."

Morris advanced another step, his eyes looking straight into Miner's, with the level look of a tiger's. "No, y' won't. You're too much of an infernal, sneaky little whelp!"

At the word whelp, he cuffed him with his hammer-like fist, and Miner went down in a heap. He was so abject that the young man could only strike him with his open hand.

He took him by the shirt collar with his left hand, and began to cuff him, leisurely and terribly, with his right.

His blows punctuated his sentences. "You're a little (whack) villain. I'll thrash you till you won't see out of your blasted eyes for a month. I can't stand a man (here he jounced him up and down with his left hand, apparently with infinite satisfaction) who bullies his wife and children as you do (here he cuffed him again), and I'll make it my business to even things up—"

The prostrate man began to scream for help. He was livid with fear. He saw death in his assailant's eye.

"Help! help! Minnie!"

"Call her by her first name now (here he whacked him again with his right hand), will yeh? Call her out to help yeh! Do you think she will? I want to tell you, besides, I know something about that mill burning. It's just like your contemptible mustard-seed of a soul."

Mrs. Miner came flying out. She could not recognize her husband in the bleeding, dirty, abject thing squirming under the young man's knee.

"Why, Mr. Morris, who—why—why, it's Tom!" she gasped, her eyes distended with surprise and horror.

Morris looked up at her coolly. "Yes, it's Tom." He then gave his attention to the writhing figure under him. "Crawl, you infernal whelp! Lick the dust, confound you! (Here he whacked him again.) Quick!" he commanded, growing each moment more savage.

Mrs. Miner clung to his arm. "Please don't," she pleaded. "You're killing him."

Morris did not look up. "Oh, no, I ain't. I'm giving him a little taste of his own medicine." He flopped Miner over on his face and dragged him around in the dust, like an old sack. "Beg her pardon, or I'll thrash the ground with yeh!"

"Please don't," pleaded the wife, using her whole strength to stop him in his circuit with the almost insensible Miner.

"Beg!" he said again, "beg, or I'll cave your backbone in." There was a terrible upward inflection in his voice now, a half-jocular tone that was more terrible than the muffled snarl in which he had previously been speaking.

"I beg! I beg!" cried Miner.

Morris released him, and he crawled to a sitting posture. Mrs. Miner fell on her knees by his side, and began wiping the blood from his face. She was breathless with sobbing, and the children were screaming. The tears streamed down her face, which was white and drawn into ghastly wrinkles.

"You've killed him!" she gasped.

Morris put his hands in his pockets and looked down on them both, with a curious feeling of having done something which he might repent of. He felt, in a way, cut off from a satisfactory ending of the thing.

"Oh, you've killed him!"

"Oh, no, I haven't. He's all right." He looked at them a moment longer, as if to see if there was any rage remaining in the face of the husband, and then as if to see how the wife felt concerning his action. Then he looked back at the husband again, and apparently justified himself for what he had done by the memory of the ineffable shame to which the wife had been subjected.

"Now, if I hear another word of your abuse," he said, as he shook the dust from his own clothes and prepared to go, "I'll give you another that will make you think that this is all fooling. More than that," he said, turning again, "I know something that will put you where the crows won't eat you. If I can be of any service to you, Mrs. Miner, at any time while I'm here, I hope you'll let me know. Good-by!"

Mrs. Miner did not reply, and when Morris reached the gate and looked back, she was still kneeling by the side of her husband, the sunlight shining down upon her graceful head.

He went back to his work on the other side of the river, where his crew was working. He was called home a few weeks later, and he never saw husband or wife again. He learned from Wilber, however, in a short letter, that things were going much the same as ever:

"Dear Sir: I don't know much about Miner. Hees purty quiet, I guess. Dock Moss thinks hees a little off his nut. I don't. I think its pur cussidness."